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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000439

STATE FOR AF/E, PRM/AFR, S/CRS AND USAID
ADDIS ABABA FOR REFCOORD
NAIROBI FOR RDRAPCHO AND REFCOORD
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TAGS: PREF SMIG EAID SO ET DJ YM XA
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI - IMPACT OF SOMALI REFUGEES AND YEMEN-BOUND
MIGRANTS

REF: A) DJIBOUTI 437 B) DJIBOUTI 223 C) 07 DJIBOUTI 1004

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Representatives from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the National Office of Assistance to Refugees and Disaster Stricken People (ONARS)--the Government of Djibouti (GoDJ) office in charge of refugee affairs--reported the ongoing arrival of refugees/migrants at the Djibouti-Somaliland border and at the city of Obock, in the northern region of Djibouti. As the refugees continue to arrive, UNHCR's registration backlog continues to grow due to the increasing influx. The migrants seek traffickers in a desperate attempt to cross the sea to Yemen from Djibouti. The GoDJ only grants *prima facie* refugee status to those from southern Somalia. END SUMMARY.

REGISTRATION BACKLOG

¶2. (U) On March 20, UNHCR reported an estimated 1,500 refugee registration backlog. Both UNHCR and ONARS lack human and technical resources to screen, house, and feed the refugees, creating a registration backlog. Those who traveled to Djibouti to seek refuge wait at the border for ONARS and UNHCR every day. ONARS picks them up once a day or every other day, conducts a head count at the border, loads the refugees onto the back of a truck, and takes them to the ONARS compound in Djibouti city where they will stay for up to two days, waiting for registration. UNHCR receives many of the refugees from ONARS without registering and/or screening them.

REFUGEES OR MIGRANTS

¶3. (U) Not all crossing the border seek refugee status in Djibouti; many intend to use Djibouti as a transit point to Yemen, which will eventually lead them to the Middle East in search of economic opportunities. Migrants quickly make their way to Djibouti city--less than 20 kilometers away from the Loyada border crossing between Djibouti and Somaliland--seeking traffickers to assist taking them to the coastal town of Obock, 230 kilometers north of Djibouti city and across the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a relatively short crossing to Yemen.

¶4. (U) While in Djibouti city, migrants seek shelter with friends and family, in mosques, and in smugglers' safe houses. Many of the most vulnerable new arrivals-- including large numbers of unaccompanied minors, women and children--can be found sleeping in the streets. The refugee influx has created more competition for space and food among the already impoverished population.

MIGRANTS DETAINED IN OBOCK

¶15. (U) On March 16, UNHCR Representative Ann Encontro and the Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior and Executive Secretary of ONARS, Mr. Hassan Omar, visited a detention center in the coastal town of Obock, located in the northern region of Djibouti. During their visit, they witnessed over 200 people crammed in a room not meant to hold more than 20 people. The detainees consisted of Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans. The police intercepted the migrants as traffickers attempted to travel with them by sea between Djibouti and Yemen. The Obock Commissioner fed the detained migrants rice once a day, using his personal funds.

GODJ CRACKS DOWN ON TRAFFICKERS

¶16. (U) Mr. Omar reported that since the Government of Yemen complained about refugees exiting Djibouti, and attempting to enter the Yemen via the sea, the GoDJ has taken appropriate measures to contain the movement of migrants. The UNHCR office in Yemen confirmed the Government of Yemen's complaints. The GoDJ has begun to crack down on the traffickers and their middlemen, rounding up illegal migrants considered being transits. In March, the GoDJ captured 180 migrants during raids in Obock. Those complicit in trafficking were arrested, and three boats and a vehicle were seized during the operations. In their attempt to halt the trafficking, the GoDJ created checkpoints on suspected travel routes to intercept traffickers; however, migrants found alternate routes to Obock.

¶17. (U) Traffickers charge USD 100-150 for a journey from Djibouti to Yemen. Migrants pay the money to the middlemen, who work from kiosks in town. Despite the improbability of boats leaving the country due to the increased patrolling by police and coast guard units, migrants have been more than willing to pay as they are promised and/or in search of a better life. Too often the migrants never reach the shores of Yemen. The traffickers will sail around Djibouti's coastal waters overnight; then drop the migrants off on the shores of Djibouti, assuring them they have arrived in Yemen; or the migrants are thrown off the boat and forced to swim at least one kilometer to the shores of Yemen, causing many to lose their lives by drowning.

¶18. (U) UNHCR reported that the crackdown has caused many of the migrants choosing to transit to lie low in the city, waiting for an opportunity to arise and for the Yemen transit to resume. Meanwhile, many have decided to travel the long and dangerous path from Obock through Eritrea and on to Sudan, and Libya.

SEEKING REFUGE IN DJIBOUTI

¶19. (SBU) Despite the mass movement to seek refuge in the Middle East, many Somali refugees continue to cross at Loyada seeking refuge in Djibouti. Since independence in 1977, Djibouti has been accepting refugees from its neighboring countries. Today, it continues, despite the fact that they do not have the infrastructure or the means to cope with the flow of the incoming refugees and migrants. Mr. Omar is afraid the GoDJ will soon close its borders. He identifies the need for Djibouti to act quickly; however, he sees no solution in the near future.

¶110. (SBU) Economic migrants from Ethiopia and some Eritreans fleeing harsh conditions reportedly cross the border and mainly take refuge in Djibouti city. Mr. Omar spoke of an increasing number of pastoral populations from the Ogaden area in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, who enter Djibouti fleeing the current political situation and drought. The UNHCR representative reported that the GoDJ avoided publicizing the situation, not wanting to displease Ethiopian authorities. Except for southern Somalis, no other newly arriving refugees are granted *prima facie* status; instead, they must undergo screening by the national eligibility commission, jointly operated by ONARS and UNHCR on a case-by-case basis. The GoDJ to date has not opened the latter possibility to arrivals originating from the Ogaden, fearing an additional influx of refugees.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: The GoDJ and UNHCR see no end to the refugee and migrant influx. UNHCR's projected 2008 refugee arrival numbers have reportedly already been attained before the first quarter of this year. All refugee agencies in Djibouti are overwhelmed by the situation. Post will be preparing a Section 1207/1210 proposal outlining border security needs and other concerns of the GoDJ resulting from this recent influx of refugees from southern Somalia, including the need to construct border crossing stations at Loyada and other areas along the Djibouti-Somalia border. END COMMENT.

SYMINGTON